

Endangered species

The disappearance of youth from the wilderness

By [GT Jones](#) 05/29/2008

Over the past 20 years our children have become increasingly alienated from the natural world. They have abandoned our open spaces and wilderness where unstructured imaginative play has existed for as long as the human species. Youthful expeditions that discovered shortcuts to school and secret hiding places are being eradicated by societal fears and impending litigation. Days spent building forts in the woods and swimming in ponds are quickly fading from our social history. At best, the constricting radius children are allowed to travel around their homes limits them to the trusted patches of grass and concrete in the frontyard.

The effects of this nature deficit on the physical, emotional and spiritual health of our youth are popular topics in the social laboratory. Sacramento State University offers a course solely examining the effects of television on our youth. It is considered a likely contributor to childhood obesity, aggressive behaviors and Attention Deficit Disorder.

It is a curious abandonment from a parenting philosophy that once produced some of the best lessons of childhood. Kevin Smith remembers growing up in Camarillo.

“As kids my brother and I, along with several neighborhood friends, would spend hours playing in a large wheat field at the end of our street,” Smith says. “We would dig holes and build ‘forts’ with whatever we had laying around the house. Sometimes our parents would let us camp out overnight. This would all disappear twice a year when the land owner plowed the field so he could replant wheat for his cattle.”

Natasha Morisawa, a bioterrorism and emergency preparedness analyst, remembers walking her dogs for hours with her sister. They toured local parks, learning the neighborhood along the way.

“Not just our street or block, but details about the blocks between our house and the park; details that we would never know if we rode in the car,” Morisawa says.

THE ELECTRONIC NANNY

What is blamed for the disconnect? The ever-rising popularity of video games, television and computers are obvious targets. For the first time in history, early life experiences are formed more by LCD pixels and cartoon characters than insect collections and treehouses. A study conducted by Kaiser Family Foundation found that U.S. youth now spend an average of five hours a day — 40 percent of their awake hours — in front of electronic devices. And the behavior starts young. Children younger than 2 years old will spend more than two hours daily in front of a media screen.



In 1997, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) focused their studies on the potential health risks that television, movies, music videos and video games present to our youth. Since then, it has been linked to a number of conditions. It is generally accepted as a contributor to childhood obesity and hypertension by encouraging inactivity. Compounding the problem, the most commonly advertised foods during children's programming are high in fat, sugar and salt. Academically, there is a relationship between excessive television viewing and a decline in reading and comprehension skills. Emotionally, media overexposure can contribute to aggressive behaviors and desensitization to violence. As children grow into young adults, conditions with body image, sexuality and self-concept may also develop from the portrayal of unrealistic scenarios.

But researchers aren't ready to say that digital and media entertainment are completely to blame. They may only be symptoms of greater challenges; something to fill a child's time

due to lost options.

THE CRIMINALIZATION OF PLAY

In today's communities, money has become a powerful source of retribution. Mental anguish, embarrassment and disrespect all have a price. We sue over ruined pants and a neighbor's blowing leaves. Playtime is not exempt from this system. The fear of litigation from a child falling from a tree or tripping at a creek crossing is too great. Nervous homeowners dissolved any play in their yards, fearful that a slip on wet grass could lead to losing their home, their retirement, or their own child's college fund.

A powerful influence in the criminalization of play comes from a growing form of private government. Homeowner's associations have flourished in new communities. Membership is required. As it appears in their mission statements, their purpose is "to promote the general welfare and support the common good of its members as well as to maintain property values."

To accomplish this goal they use regulations. Lots of regulations. Outlawing dumping trash in the street, for instance. But it doesn't end there. Latently, HOA regulations impose limitations on expression and lifestyle. Houses must be painted one of three shades of tan. Clothes may not be line-dried in backyards. Commercial work vehicles are banned from driveways and streets overnight. There shall be no more than two pets in any household. Neighbors no longer need to tolerate the differences between one another. They can homogenize the nonconformist with regulations.

When asked how he liked children W.C. Fields responded, "Parboiled." W.C. Fields is an active resident in many of today's communities. Whether it's over noise complaints or vandalism worries, there is someone waiting to disassemble any unauthorized gatherings

of children. And Homeowners associations provide a fantastic soapbox for their complaints. Members of Oakridge Estates Community Association in Newbury Park have used this system effectively.

Vocal fears of arson and teenage parties have successfully barred access to the publicly owned open space behind their homes. Posted with “no trespassing” signs, their trailheads are now blocked by locked gates and chain-link fencing. Using justifications peppered with the keyword “liability” they have effectively sanitized play into an orderly, unthreatening experience without Frisbees that can sail into the street and basketball hoops that must be hidden in the garage.

As youth are increasingly locked out of undeveloped lands, park and recreation departments scramble to create equitable outdoor experiences. A replica of the lost opportunities. They erect plastic molded climbing walls, cushioned groundcover, skate parks and water slides. Still, the same concerns about liability remain. They must be aware not only of obvious dangers, but of every possibility of what could go wrong, freak accident or not. It has to be foolproof. Fingers remain crossed.

OUTDOOR EDUCATION

Public education once took an interest in getting children outdoors. Now only one-third of children in the U.S. have daily physical education in school. With budget cuts and our narrowed focus on specific subject criteria, teacher shortages and overcrowding, academic courses are forced to abandon the wilderness as a classroom. The purpose of the field trip has degraded to a distraction. Nature once offered inspiration for literature and poetry. It provided practical illustration of physics experiments. It was a laboratory for biology. Now, field trips have become increasingly counterproductive.

Outdoor education returns to the parent. Parents play a significant role in how their children connect to the outdoors. Well before the beginning of formal education, parents teach lessons that build self-esteem and confidence. They introduce the life skills of safety and awareness. They show how to interact with their surroundings. Yet sometimes modern day realities dilute these lessons.

Expanding work schedules can leave little daylight for shared exploration. In its place, a growing unfamiliarity with nature now breeds modern-day neuroses; fear of insects, of the sun, of dirty water, of snakes, of coyotes, murderers and rapists all lurking just beyond the frontyard.

THE INFORMATION AGE

In 1980 Turner Broadcasting launched CNN, introducing America to a new news format. A 24-hours-a-day endlessly looping news format. Not far behind, cable television multiplied our channel count from five to hundreds. How to fill all those channels, all those hours? Repetition. Hour after hour, network upon network. Repeat daily.

In 1989, the World Wide Web was born. The Internet provided a platform for accelerating information around the globe. Once connected, the public no longer had to wait for delivery of news through television and print media — they could hunt for it. An avenue to know practically anything we wanted at any time, ad nauseum. Our hunter gatherer nature was aroused. It has been a spectacular renaissance in many ways.

Parents embraced the new format, collecting information that would keep themselves and their children safer; a parent's ultimate responsibility. But what do they ultimately find?

A 20-second Internet search presents these results:

A non-family member abduction occurs every nine minutes in the United States.

There are 4 million pet dog attacks in the U.S., mostly on children.

As many as 1 in 20 adults has active pedophile thoughts or tendencies. (Global Children's Fund)

About 1,000 children die from drowning.

Every year approximately 250,000 children are brought to the emergency room due to a bicycle injury.

Heather Quaal, a mother of two and the former president of the MOMS Club of Ventura addresses the concerns she's heard.

"I hear about mountain lion sightings at the school down the road ... I have heard of men trying to walk off with children at Arroyo Verde into the hill," Quaal says. We know where every sex offender and violent felon lives in our neighborhood.

Then the newspaper arrives and headlines reinforce the threats. "Oxnard Man Shot to Death," "Bird Tests Positive for West Nile Virus," "Mountain Lion Sighted on Ventura Rooftop." Television carries us further from home.

"A Chino Hills Park is closed after a coyote attack on a 2-year-old ... "

"Police are searching for a 14-year-old girl that went missing from her Bel Air home early Tuesday ... " With information like this appearing by the strike of a keyboard or the push of a remote control, it is understandable why parents are fearful. There are a world of threats leaned up against our front door.

Enter the Free Range Kid.

THE FREE RANGE KID MOVEMENT

Last month Lenore Skenazy of New York City was labeled the “Worst Mother in the World” by public critics across the country. What does a mother need to do to garner such virulent disapproval across America? She dropped her 9-year-old son off at a department store in New York, and challenged him to return home safely.

At his pleading, Skenezy left her son inside a New York city Bloomingdale’s. He wanted the challenge of finding his way back, alone, one subway ride and a bus connection from their home. Mom gave him a subway map, a Metro card, a 20 dollar bill and some change for a phone call. She told him what to do if he got lost. Then she returned to their home and waited. He found his way back without incident, mother and child both thrilled by his accomplishment.

When Skenazy mentioned the event to friends and acquaintances she was met with unrestrained condemnation. She was reminded of a recent abduction of a young girl in Florida.

“How would you have felt if he didn’t come home?”

“I don’t want to be the one on TV explaining my daughter’s disappearance.” And that was before Skenazy put it in writing. As an opinion columnist with a typically humorous slant, she hardly expected the massive reaction that was coming when she documented it in her weekly New York Sun column.

As the controversy grew, Skenazy started a blog and message board where opponents and supporters gathered to debate. (freerangekids.wordpress.com). Some visitors embrace her parenting decision completely, some agree philosophically but are unable to engage in the practice, and others outright condemn the experience as criminal.

The debate spawned a new parenting approach, or rather, a return to an old one. The Free Range Kid Movement was born. Despite accusations to the contrary, Free Range Parents don’t discourage bicycle helmets, car seats or airbags. They don’t encourage running with scissors. They want a return to the lifestyle that existed before the information age — including the risks that come with it. They believe it is essential to training children’s independence and decision-making abilities. Free Range Parents allow their pre-teen children to walk to school alone. To ride their bicycles to the library. To play in the woods unsupervised.

Free Range Parents also come armed with their own counter-statistics. That a child is 40 times more likely to die in a car accident than be abducted. That, contrary to statistics broadcast on the Today Show, the U.S. Justice Department shows a decline in child abductions since 1988. And since 1980, death rates dropped by about half for children between the ages of 5 and 14.

Ventura County is home to two of the safest communities in America, Thousand Oaks and Simi Valley, though you wouldn’t always know it. Even for parents who agree with the philosophy of the movement, they don’t find it quite so simple to practice.

“I think there is a generalized feeling that the open spaces are wonderful in a supervised situation, but that unsupervised there is too much potential for a predator to be lying in wait, whether it be one of the human or animal,” says Heather Quaal.

Natasha Morisawa agrees: “I think I would like to be more of a ‘free range parent.’ ... But for now, I will acknowledge my vulnerability and do what I can so that I can raise these boys in the best world I know.”

One side will argue the reason the numbers are down is because their children are better protected from the threats. The other side will argue that the threats never existed in the first place. With many parents, the risk is too great or too frivolous. Some make little distinction between free range parenting and the criminally negligent.

NATURE CURES

What is generally agreed by both sides is the effect this nature deficit is having on our youth. The responsibility to nurture healthy, confident and curious children hasn’t changed. Childhood obesity, caused by the body taking in more calories than it burns, has tripled since 1960. In addition, Type 2 diabetes, mellitus, hypertension and obstructive sleep apnea are all conditions that can carry directly into adulthood. Nature experiences have been increasingly abandoned as one of the most effective cures to these conditions.

In his book *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv acknowledges the challenge. “Parents already feel besieged by the difficulty of balancing work and family life. Understandably, they may resist the idea of adding any to-dos to their long list of chores. So here is another way of viewing the challenge: Nature as an antidote. Stress reduction, greater physical health, a deeper sense of spirit, more creativity, a sense of play, even a safer life — these are the rewards that await a family when it invites more nature into children’s lives.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics agrees. It believes increasing physical activity and shifting to a healthy diet can reverse many of the recent childhood illness trends. Psychologically, it finds that outdoor physical activity increases self-esteem and self-concept, just as it decreases anxiety and depression.

The debate between cause and symptom will continue, but is ultimately irrelevant to the child sitting passively in their living room today. As children fall further out of sync with nature, they miss the lessons nature has provided for youth during all of human existence. By keeping our youth indoors, we risk confining them to a very small, often paranoid world. Parents may need to reinforce in themselves that muddy hands and an occasional skinned knee are part of growing up. Through this, their children will learn about a world of mysticism and surprise, amusement and challenge that exists beyond their electronic world. A world that is waiting for them on the other side of the screen door.